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mystery of Miles

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He had a great ear for talent. Among the musicians he hired who became stars, largely due to their exposure in his bands, are (in rough chronology) Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, Ron Carter, Joe Zawinul, Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, Keith Jarrett, Jack de Johnette, Dave Holland, David Liebman, Kenny Garrett and Marcus Miller. He often communicated with musicians wordlessly; often with just a nod, a point of his finger.

British bassist Holland, an unknown when Miles hired him in 1968 for his excursion into jazz rock, told Davis biographer Ian Carr: "It was almost like a haiku thing - or a Zen thing where the master says a couple of words and the student gets enlightened." The advice included, "Don't play what's there. Play what's not there ... Don't play what you go for. Play the next thing."

For many like myself, Davis's rock excursions represented an avenue into jazz history. André Menard, co-founder of the Montreal festival, recalled this week: "In college we heard Bitches Brew the way we heard a rock record, and that triggered our interest in jazz as a whole."

While he had desultory results reaching the black masses, Davis was the principal inspiration behind the cerebral coming-of-age of European jazz.

Photos of Davis flirting with Juliette Greco and Jeanne Moreau recall his riveting effect on post-war French jazz lovers. Boris Vian, renaissance man of the Left Bank, offered readers a non-pareil description of young Davis's approach upon his 1949 Paris debut: "The first thing that strikes you about Miles Davis is that he's really beautiful to look at. ... His articulation is absolutely flabbergasting. The spaces which suddenly appear in the middle of sinuous lines serve to relax (physically) and excite (intellectually) at the same time." His sound was "mute, vulnerable, almost no vibrato, totally calm ... a monk's sound - somebody who is part of this century but who can look at it with serenity."

The exhibition gets up close and personal with Miles, lifting some of the mystery behind the musician. There are rare photos of Davis in his extravagantly appointed Manhattan apartment, behind the wheel of his red Ferrari 275 GTB, with such lady friends as Greco, actress Cicely Tyson, and singer Betty Mabry (and you gaze closely for signs of the passive-aggression that made him a notorious woman abuser).

There are photos of various recording sessions (including a playful triptych of Davis and producer Teo Macero whispering in each other's ears), of club and concert dates, illuminating the creative process. There is Bill Evans's original scribbling of his liner notes for Kind of Blue (probably the most famous liners in jazz history) and music sheets from his collaborations with Gil Evans and sessions with Hancock, Shorter and company.

Posters and advertisements graphically reveal the tenor of the times, jazz history in the making (one for the Manhattan club Boy City heralds "The City of the Future," another for the Fillmore's double bill with the Grateful Dead). A matchbook for the Royal Roost heralds it as "The Metropolitan Bopera House." He was the first jazzman to fully understand the artistic and commercial possibilities of the long-play album cover; there's a plethora of iconic portraits and artwork.

And there are photos of Miles in the boxing gym. The sweet science fascinated him - he adored Sugar Ray Robinson's smooth style - serving him psychologically and physically. However, Davis had a running battle with his health - sickle cell anemia, pneumonia, a hip replacement, knee problems, split lips - compounded by bouts of drug use. It would catch up to him.

Like Picasso, Davis masterfully marketed his charisma, and that was always problematic. "Miles made money with anything he touched," Joe Zawinul, who wrote the seminal jazz-rock tune In a Silent Way, told me years ago. "Quite simply, he did this because he wanted to."

"The real money was in getting to the mainstream," Miles admitted. "I never thought that the music called 'jazz' was ever meant to reach just a small group of people, or become a museum thing."

The most notorious scorching of this stance was Stanley Crouch's essay On the Corner: The Sellout of Miles Davis (1989). Davis had "become the most remarkable licker of monied boots in the music business, willing now to pimp himself ... intimidated into mining the fool's gold of rock 'n' roll," and so on.

Crouch - the mouthpiece behind Wynton Marsalis's neo-conservative movement - clearly loathed electronics in jazz. It was no longer so-called pure jazz (whatever that is) and, in this narrow regard, he's dead-on. Yet jazz critics and fans - insular and protective of the music's early heritage - have always engaged in ongoing disagreements, often virulent, about what is and isn't jazz. (For some, bebop was a perversion, not the revolution that became the lingua franca of improvisation.) Davis, like Ellington, thought the word "jazz" was confining. Thus the exhibition's fitting subtitle: Miles Davis vs. Jazz.

And yet, by the time Davis retired from the scene for seven years in 1975 - holed up in his darkened apartment indulging in dope and sex (though typically inflated in his autobiography) - his greatest periods of creativity were spent. When he returned, his clothes got crazier; one photo shows Andy Warhol trailing behind Davis on a fashion runway holding his exaggerated train. The music included pop covers (including a definitive version of Cyndi Lauper's Time After Time).

As critic Francis Davis wrote in 1987, Miles "has no longer been setting trends, just following them. In attempting to crack urban contemporary radio, he isn't selling out so much as buying in - the baddest horn in jazz gamely trying to impress his badness on younger black listeners for whom a horn is merely a prop for puttin' on the hits." He was "in danger of becoming a celebrity, one of those people famous for being famous."

His comeback concert at Théâtre St. Denis for the 1982 Montreal jazz fest was a case in point. While his previous local appearance, at Place des Arts in 1973, was a scintillating display of complex electric funk, filled with sounds we'd never previously heard, the comeback was bloated with breathless anticipation, fascinating enough but blighted with longueurs. André Menard remembers: "I had never before been in the presence of such a rock-solid aura." Indeed, his aura spoke louder than much of the music.

In 1986, after 30 years with Columbia Records and feeling ignored in favour of Marsalis, he moved to Warner Brothers and recorded the hit album Tutu, techno-funk largely conceived by bassist Marcus Miller (who reprises it at L'Astral on Wednesday). A saxophonist friend had recommended Miller to Miles in 1981, while he was plotting his comeback.

"He called and within two hours I was recording with him," Miller recalled this week. "There was no time to get nervous or anticipate what it was going to be like. He was pretty out there when I joined him. I think cocaine was probably involved.

"But after a couple years he reconnected with Cicely Tyson, she put him on a health routine, and he made a huge turnaround. When I saw him again in 1985, I was so surprised. He was healthy and alive, so different from the guy I played with earlier. When he wasn't in great shape he was a lot more cryptic, and it was harder to figure out what he wanted. Not that he was ever really talkative, he was always kind of 'Figure it out on your own.' But things were much clearer when he was in good health. He was playing much stronger, and he was really leading the band with his trumpet, instead of the other way around."

Toward the end of his life, Davis reluctantly revisited Gil Evans's arrangements, at the urging of Quincy Jones; a protégé, Wallace Roney, played many of his solos. He was happier, and more successful, two days later in a Paris reunion of his now-classic jazz-rock band.

Just weeks later, on Sept. 28, 1991, the Prince of Darkness - the Picasso of Jazz - died of pneumonia, his body wracked at age 65. Long live Miles ... We want Miles!

We Want Miles: Miles Davis vs. Jazz opens Friday at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion, 1380 Sherbrooke St. W., and runs until Aug. 29. For more information, visit www.mbam.qc.ca/en.

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"The first thing that strikes you about Miles Davis is that he's really beautiful to look at."

Boris Vian

"I never thought that the music called 'jazz' was ever meant to reach just a small group of people."

Miles Davis

MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

Miles Davis performs at the Montreal International Jazz Festival, in these 1982 (top) and undated photos that are included in the We Want Miles exhibition.

Miles to hear

The Charlie Parker Dial & Savoy Masters (1945-48) Seminal jazz history, with young Davis at bebop's beginnings. His coolness complements Parker's unequalled improvisatory brilliance.

Birth of the Cool (1949-51) Launching a mellifluous, easy listening style, this is jazz's most famous nine-piece orchestra. Get the remastering by Rudy Van Gelder, whose attention to detail makes this a brand-new recording.

Cookin', Relaxin', Steamin', Workin' (1956) Recorded in marathon sessions over two days, to fulfill contract obligations to Prestige before moving to Columbia, these albums spotlight his initial alchemy with a young John Coltrane.

Miles Ahead (1957) The arrangements by Gil Evans — combining smoothness, complexity and slight dissonance — remain the gold standard.

Porgy and Bess (1958) Gershwin never sounded so sumptuous.

Kind of Blue (1959) Well, duh. The most seductive jazz album ever, one-off improvisations based on hypnotic repetitive "modes" by John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderly, Bill Evans et al. Get the 50th anniversary edition, with five tracks by the same sextet.

Sketches of Spain (1960) Sophisticated, sensual "world-music" includes the most popular version of Rodrigo's Concerto de Aranjuez.

My Funny Valentine (1964) Live set of gorgeous ballads, including protean Herbie Hancock piano fillgree and superb sax by unheralded George Coleman.

Nefertiti (1967) Haunting classic modernism by arguably Davis's best group (Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter, Tony Williams), complements E.S.P. (1965) and Miles Smiles (1966).

In A Silent Way (1969); Bitches Brew (1969); A Tribute to Jack Johnson (1970); Live-Evil (1970) Jazz-rock was never more scintillating than this. Dramatic, incandescent, cookin' music with a sorcerer's magic.

On the Corner (1972) Miles threw everything but the kitchen sink (including electric sitar and tablas) in this fiendishly complex street funk whose time has come.

Aura (1985) Pithy solos in a stunning tribute to Davis orchestrated by Danish trumpeter Palle Mikkelborg, redolent of Gil Evans, Ives and Messiaen. An overlooked masterpiece.

Amandla (1989) Superior, groovy, multi-layered techno-funk, produced and largely written by Marcus Miller, with fine sax solos by Kenny Garrett. Miles' last hurrah.

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